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THE PROVERBS OF THE BIBLE AND OTHER
PROVERBS.

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It is not difficult to discover the resemblances of the proverbs of the Bible to those in other literatures. A proverb is a proverb the world over. The form of statement, brief, sententious, with a series of parallel phrases, or clauses, cumulative in effect or condensed into a sharp antithesis,—these are essential characteristics of the proverbial style. Whether the English say, “The receiver is as bad as the thief;”—the Scotch, “A man may love his house well without riding on the ridge;”—the Spanish, “An ass knows in whose face he brays;”—the Italian, “A misfortune and a friar are seldom alone;”—the Chinese, “Towers are measured by their shadows and great men by their slanderers;”—the Persian, “A stone that is fit for the wall is not left in the way;”—or the Hebrew, “He that spareth the rod hateth his son;”—in each and all we discern the common qualities of expression.

The biblical proverbs stand in line with others also in the subjects of which they treat. This form of expression seems to be the chosen vessel into which to pour the good wine of prudence, common-sense, experience, practical wisdom. Not the impassioned oratory of the prophetic diction, but the calm, cool, didactic maxim of the sages seems to be the kind of speech suited to conveying moral truth to the people. The prophet flies, the sage walks;—and there are many more sages than prophets. In the wisdom literature of the Bible, therefore, we find the intersecting or tangential point, the especial one, where it meets and blends with the writings of the whole world. The favorite realms of all proverbs are certain spheres of life such as the family, everyday society, commerce, public and private morals. Thus parallel with the Bible we have these sentences from other nations:—The

beginning of wisdom is the fear of God; He that honoreth his father longeth his days; Robbery taketh away much wealth; Be content with what God giveth and thou shalt be rich. The Egyptians say, "Do not seek after the advice of a fool:—Make not a companion of wicked men"—admonitions which might occur in the mouth of any earnest and holy man. The warnings against the strange woman make themselves heard from the land of the Nile long before Solomon preached without practicing. The Buddhists say, "If the traveler does not meet with one who is his better or his equal, let him keep firmly to his solitary journey, there is no companionship with a fool;" "The fool who knows his foolishness is wise at least so far, but the fool who thinks himself wise, he is a fool indeed;" "As a solid rock is not shaken by the wind, wise people falter not amidst blame or praise;" "If one man conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and if another conquer himself, he is the greatest of conquerors."

Thus comparisons might be indefinitely multiplied. Some among the most important are those admonitions which may be quoted from the Egyptian sage Ani. "Eat not bread in the presence of a servant who stands before thee without offering him a morsel; there is peace to him who acts brotherly." "Speak gently to the stubborn," "A man falls through his tongue." "A man must learn to be content with his lot." "Thou hast made for thyself a well-watered garden; thou hast inclosed thy land with hedges; thou hast planted rows of sycamore; thou fillest thy hands with thine own flowers;—yet a man grows weary of all this."

There seems to be an interesting and instructive parallel between the chapters of the Book of Proverbs in which is inscribed the praise of wisdom, and an Egyptian papyrus on the praise of learning. A lover of study writes a poem in praise of his mistress and compares her to other pursuits. "The scribe [i. e., the learned man] gives satisfaction and is not inactive." He is exhorted, "Love Letters, [i. e., learning], as thy mother. I will make its beauty appear unto thee. It surpasses all other work. It makes one who avails himself of it from his infancy a counsellor. He receives dig-

nity and honor, is sent on embassies. I have never seen a blacksmith go on an embassy. He spends his time at the furnace, his fingers black and hard like a crocodile skin. [Then the proud student of learning goes on with his comparisons.] The carpenter, the barber, the gardener passing the morning watering vegetables and spreading muck, the farmer whose clothes are for eternity [he wears them so long,] the weaver—all do not bear comparison with the scribe. He belongs to the royal council. He eats the things of the royal palace of the king. Therefore, be attentive and heed sound learning and instruction.”

It is a much more difficult and delicate task to mark the contrasts between the two intersecting spheres of related literatures here under consideration. In general it may be said, that the Scripture Proverbs differ from the mass of other proverbs in being the outgrowth not of popular experience but of literary study. This Hebrew book was the production of a class of wise men, teachers, whose business it was to impart their instruction in this sententious fashion. Popular proverbs spring up we know not where nor how. They are the expression of an average sentiment; they are traceable to nobody in particular; they are the deposit of universal experience. But the former have arisen from the experience and profound thought of men of no ordinary wisdom, men of special endowments, passing their lives in the study of the elements of right-living, shrewd and careful observers, who have condensed into this book the cream of their wit and wisdom.

But again, this difference in origin would naturally be followed by a difference in the mode of expression. The vocabulary of the one would be unlike that of the other, and so we find it. The literary man, the sage, has his style, keen, critical, but artificial or, at least, artistic. The child of the common people would be bright indeed and sharp, but rough, simple, artless. Thus while, in measured phrase, the wise father in the Proverb exhorts his son to avoid the way of evil men lest he be led astray, the word of the people is “He that lies down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.” Thus, again and again, while traveling along the same path

of common human experience, the two speakers utter the same thought in widely different modes of expression.

But we are reminded that all comparisons are difficult and do not always hold. One great literature, instead of revealing these two differences of origin and form, shows a remarkable likeness in both respects to the wisdom of the Bible. I refer to the literary production of the Confucian philosophy. Its writers were sages. Parallelism, as in Hebrew, is the characteristic mode of expression. As the Hebrew of the Book of Proverbs is pure and classical, so is the Chinese of the Confucian analects. Between the two men, Solomon and Confucius, an interesting and close parallel might be drawn, for, as Martin says, "the latter won for himself the title of *Su Wang*, 'the unsceptered monarch,' whose intellectual sway was acknowledged by all ages. Confucius understood the power of proverbs and, incorporating into his system such as met his approval, he cast his own teachings into the same mould. His speeches are laconic and oracular, and he has transmitted to posterity a body of political ethics expressed in formulæ so brief and comprehensive that it may easily be retained in the weakest memory."

These very likenesses, however, serve but to emphasize more strongly the great, and we may say, the universal contrast which holds between biblical and other proverbs—the predominance in the former of the moral and religious element. No student of this form of literary expression can fail to discern how isolated and singular the biblical wisdom stands in this respect. Study it numerically. Take any collection of proverbs of any other nation or body of men and count up the number of sayings that are touched with moral or religious sentiments and motives; the ratio falls far below that of the Scriptures. In a similar way observe what subjects are admitted to these collections, that the Book of Proverbs utterly omits. How much worldly wisdom, how much villainy, how much of what is far worse do these others contain. Finally, compare them not horizontally but perpendicularly. Observe the lofty height to which these biblical Proverbs at times rise, the severe tone of austere morality, the loveliness of the divine mercy, the ideal which

is maintained; take each at its best, and there can be but little doubt that the wisdom of the Hebrew sages with all its narrowness is, after all, "the best, the purest, the wisest and most useful treasury of proverbial literature." The student is reminded of that anecdote of Pres. Wayland of Brown University. A skeptical student once informed him in his class that "certainly it needed no inspiration to write the Book of Proverbs. A man not inspired could have done it as well. Indeed, I have often thought that I could write as good proverbs myself." "Very well, my son, perhaps you can," was the prompt reply. "Suppose you make the experiment. Prepare a few proverbs and read them to the class to-morrow. The next." It is hardly necessary to add that the attempt to rival the wisdom of Solomon came to an abrupt and inglorious termination.

Like all the literary efforts of that nation to whom God revealed Himself as He did to no other people, in whose life He was present and active as in no other, this portion of Holy Scripture, where the Divine seems most humbly to bow itself down to mingle with the common life of men and to concern itself with that which is external and practical, does it not have a strength, a serenity and a beauty, both in what it says and in what it does not say, that lifts it above other corresponding literature, composed under other and more human, or rather less Divine conditions and make it therefore the ideal directory "of every one's active life and social demeanor"?